

Editorial Department.

THE highly important and intensely practical question as to the relation of insanity to crime, or, to state the matter another way, as to the responsibility of the insane before the law, has been brought to the attention of the people of this country as never before, in consequence of the recent horrible endeavor to assassinate the President of the United States. Opinions without number have been expressed, of course, as to the sanity of the dangerous wretch by whom the attempt was made.

Whether he is sane or insane is a question, however, which can be decided only in full view of all the facts germane to his case, and in a calmer state of feeling than has been known up to this time by any right-minded citizen.

The startling character of the case grows out of its unusual and widespread relations, rather than from its novelty. Such crimes are committed with great frequency, in which persons treading the humbler walks of life are the victims, and in which, in the eye of the law, the same aggravating features are present. Almost daily, in some part of our broad land, the life of some person is unexpectedly endangered or sacrificed at the hands of some ill-balanced or insane individual. In no class of cases is well-tempered justice more likely to be baffled than in dealing with such insane criminals. Society, horror-stricken by such events, cries out, with the instinct of self-preservation, for the speedy and condign punishment of the criminal; and yet the hand of justice is stayed, as it ought to be, by the plea of irresponsibility.

That there are insane criminals there can be no question. That responsibility in the presence of the law is attenuated in various degrees by unsoundness of mind cannot be doubted. That the plea of insanity will be set up whenever possible, is to be expected, for, as a rule, it is in human nature to adopt every possible expedient to avoid the extreme penalties of the law. According to the rule in such cases, it may be confidently expected that the plea of insanity will be made in behalf of the criminal Guiteau. For the credit of human nature, and in view of such facts as have been already made public, we do not see how it can be held that the criminal was sane. We have no reasonable doubt of his unsoundness of mind.

The important question with this class of cases is, what shall be done with them? We have long been convinced as to what the proper course is to adopt in such cases. It is this: Whenever, in the case of murder or any other flagrant crime against society, the plea of insanity is set up and successfully maintained, then the penalty should be the incarceration of the criminal for life in a prison asylum. Under no circumstances should such a person be turned loose into society again after having manifested such dangerous tendencies.

It is our hope that one of the results which may grow out of the event which has so shocked the nation, may be the passage of simple, stringent, well-considered laws providing for the disposal in this way of all dangerous insane criminals. In this way only can society protect itself and justice considerably avoid blind and useless severity. If such a plan were adopted and rigorously carried into effect, the plea of insanity would be made more rarely than at present.